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Employee Opinion Surveys Valuable Management Tool

*Samsung Electronics Uses Employee Surveys To
Check Management Perceptions Against Reality*

By Richard A. Sherwood, SPHR, Principal, Innovative HR Solutions

While many HR practices are difficult to quantify, most managers realize there's a direct connection between employee satisfaction and productivity. If employees are the primary focus of any manager's quest for increased productivity, shouldn't they play a role in determining the best workplace solutions?

Employers interested in developing a high-performance workforce know they must find out what motivates and satisfies their employees. Employees are typically thrilled when management solicits their opinions. But what's the best way to go about it? The most powerful vehicle to accomplish this goal is an anonymous employee opinion survey.

Filling out an employee opinion survey is easy for most individuals. The majority of survey formats include simple instructions and a 1-to-5 selection response system which consists of a range from strongly agreeing to strongly disagreeing with a given statement.

Although the wealth of information uncovered by an employee opinion survey can at times be astounding, it also can serve as the employer's motivation to fix what's been apparent all along.

One company wanted to abolish an expensive pension plan that had been in place for many years as a sort of silent benefit. Concerned the plan's abolishment might be perceived as an unfair takeaway, management decided it would first survey employees for their opinions about the plan. They learned the majority of their employees didn't understand or care about the pension plan. What they really wanted was a 401 (k) plan. So, with no disruption, one plan was replaced with the other and upper management was freed from its fears.

Another example involves a retail operation with \$50 million in sales and 300 employees. Employees had nowhere to move in the company and management suspected employees were feeling pigeonholed. An employee survey confirmed that employees liked their jobs yet only planned to stay for a very short period of time because the company's structure lacked opportunity for upward mobility.

As a result of the survey, management implemented a new program that included the creation of a job family matrix that provided opportunities for incremental promotions based on performance. Every six to 12 months, performance now dictates which Sales Associates are promoted to Sales Consultants.

The Before And The After

Any company thinking about tapping the benefits of employee brain-power should pay close attention to the before and after phases of the process.

Pre-Survey

Before writing the survey, spend time thinking about what the survey should specifically emphasize. This might require a focus group or special meeting where pertinent issues are identified and isolated. Taking extra time on the front end pays off when it results in more relevant survey questions and, therefore, more revealing responses.

Post-Survey

Far too often, management sighs in relief once surveys are completed and the data is analyzed and packed away neatly in a report. In fact, a company should see a survey project through to completion by using what it has learned about its employees.

It's perplexing to think of the misperceptions that are uncovered by employee opinion surveys. Even more bewildering is the choice some companies make to sit on their new information.

Conducting employee opinion surveys carries an inherent risk for management. If managers have no intention of changing their policies after the surveys have been analyzed, they'd be better off not conducting them in the first place. Employee morale tends to deteriorate if no action is taken after they have participated in a survey where their opinions were supposed to count.

Furthermore, any future attempts at soliciting employee ideas and opinions won't be well received because of lost trust and diminished belief in the process .

The Greatest Information Source

When employees feel satisfied, they are happier overall. Employees who are generally happy are far more productive than those on the other end of the spectrum or even those who fluctuate back and forth. Many companies report that soliciting their employees' opinions was the best step they could have taken in reducing labor relations issues.

Samsung Electronics, a global leader in consumer electronics, telecommunications, information systems and computer-related products, has implemented a number of changes as a result of feedback generated by employee opinion surveys.

Following the Asian economic crisis of 1997, the electronics giant underwent significant restructuring. "The organizational changes inevitably contributed to a deterioration in employee morale," explains Betty Cardenas, HR representative, Samsung. "This underscores the importance of objectively assessing the organizational climate." Cardenas says that even when surveys just confirmed what HR already knew about the climate, the results were still used as reliable backup data to support new policy initiatives.

The Ideal Tool

The win-win scenario that can be fostered by an employee opinion survey makes it an important tool for any organization to consider. Ideally, it will only confirm what management already knew. On the other hand, it may uncover glitches in the system that should have been addressed long ago. Done right, employee surveys help employers to see and to act upon what's really occurring in their organizations. It allows them to ferret out false assumptions and to glean valuable observations and suggestions from employees. Just as important, it gives employees an opportunity to make a difference.

Benefits of Conducting Employee Opinion Surveys

- Reduces turnover.
- Identifies organization-wide strengths.
- Identifies organization-wide issues and solicits ideas for corrective action.
- Gathers objective data from which management may develop a meaningful dialogue.
- Establishes benchmark data to evaluate future improvements,
- Commits executives to a process that brings them closer to employees.
- Provides employees with a stake in their employer's success,
- Attracts job candidates.
- Helps to align compensation and benefit programs to more effectively meet the needs of both employees and management.

Richard A. Sherwood, SPHR is the founder of Innovative HR Solutions.